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SUBJECT: LEBANON: CENTCOM COMMANDER VISITS WITH PRIME
MINISTER SINIORA

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (S) Admiral William J. Fallon, Commander United States Central Command met with Lebanese Prime Minister Siniora on 8/29 in Beirut, Lebanon. During this introductory meeting, ADM Fallon and PM Siniora discussed recent fighting against terrorists in the Nahr Al Bared refugee camp, Palestinian issues, the role of Syria and Iran in Lebanon, as well as the role of USG military assistance for the Lebanese Armed Forces. Primary conclusions from the meeting are that Presidential elections in Lebanon are the most important issue facing the country and that the USG will not trade away Lebanese sovereignty. End summary.

WELCOME TO BEIRUT
YOU'VE BEEN GONE SO LONG

2. (S) PM Siniora warmly welcomed Admiral Fallon and Ambassador Feltman to his office in the Grand Serail, opening his remarks with comments of appreciation and thanks for USG assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), especially during the recent period encompassing the Nahr Al Bared campaign. Siniora, in a reference to the level of US military assistance in the early 1980s, told AMB Fallon that his visit was important because "you have been gone so long." ADM Fallon is the first four-star flag officer to visit Lebanon since the Commandant of the Marine Corps visited after the bombing of the Marine Barracks in 1983.

3. (S) ADM Fallon delighted his interlocutors with stories of his time as a Midshipman in Lebanon aboard the USS AMERICA in 1966 and his subsequent missions in Lebanon in 1983. These tangible ties to the Lebanese people resonated strongly among our Lebanese hosts throughout the day, especially with the military officers who remembered these times with great nostalgia.

THE ARMY ENJOYS NATIONAL SUPPORT
WE ARE VERY PROUD OF THEM

4. (S) Recalling his visit to Washington, DC last year,

Siniora recounted his discussion with President Bush about the necessity to strengthen the LAF. While other Lebanese at the time may have disagreed with his vision about the importance of the Army and its degree of reliability, Siniora feels that Nahr Al Bared has served as the litmus test for support of the Army by the Lebanese people. While it is unfortunate that Lebanon finds itself embroiled in this war, Siniora seeks to turn this "unfortunate event" into an opportunity for greater national unity and stability throughout Lebanon.

15. (S) Siniora briefly outlined the numerous stresses his government and the nation have suffered since taking office two years ago, specifically citing the attempted assassination of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Elias Murr, as well as the constant pressure being applied by the Iranians and the Syrians.

16. (S) The main point of this exchange, according to Siniora, is that ADM Fallon should understand that the Army is supported by the people and the government. For this reason, his government was able to take an "important and courageous stand" that resonates in every aspect of the country. This national support of the Army is not only important in Lebanon, but also throughout the region.

DRAWING THE RIGHT CONCLUSIONS
NAHR AL BARED MUST BE REBUILT

17. (S) Siniora's first conclusion was that Nahr Al Bared must be re-built. There was no mention of "tawteen" (i.e., "naturalization" or permanent settlement of Palestinians in

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Lebanon, a long-standing Lebanese fear) or any of political difficulties surrounding such an operation. Siniora is confident that all of the Palestinians will return to the camp and that the Lebanese government will control the camp. The second conclusion is that the Army must remain united at all costs.

ONE MAIN PROBLEM IN LEBANON
IT LEADS TO ALL THE OTHER PROBLEMS

18. (S) Prime Minister Siniora related a complex and nuanced weave of Palestinian issues in the context of a Lebanese fabric. In a matter of fact manner, Siniora explained how Lebanon has suffered for many years, both directly and indirectly, because of this issue that resonates in so many other parts of the Arab world. At one point, Siniora exclaimed that many countries attempt to cash in their "vouchers" of support for the Palestinians at the expense of Lebanon.

19. (S) ADM Fallon said that the issue of Palestine is one of the topics he hears about often, and sometimes as an excuse. In response, Siniora deadpanned "Indeed, it is used to avoid addressing issues, it consumes many efforts, prevents democracy, leads to coup d'etats, undemocratic behavior and a feeling of desperation." In Siniora's analysis, the issue of Palestine has pushed people to find refuge in "twisted religion." Even so, Siniora insisted that the issue of the Palestinians in Lebanon must be addressed because Lebanon is part of the Arab world.

SHEBA'A FARMS
A BLEEDING WOUND FROM SYRIA

110. (S) After recounting several foreign military campaigns in Lebanon, primarily focused on the various Israeli invasions, Siniora dusted off his standard message about the "bleeding wound" of Sheba'a farms that the Syrians have inflicted on Lebanon. In his calculation, Siniora sees the

issue of Sheba'a is one that the Syrians have kept alive to use with the excuse of "unfinished business." If this were resolved, Iran and Hizbullah would no longer have a reason to cause so many problems in Lebanon.

HASSAN NASRALLAH AND IRAN
ARE THEY ONE IN THE SAME?

¶11. (S) Responding to ADM Fallon's inquiry about the role of Iran in Lebanon, Siniora stated the Nasrallah was Iran's representative in Lebanon. Siniora then spent time explaining the evolution of Hizbullah from the Shia welcoming Israeli troops in 1982 with flowers to Hizbullah's current hostile stance towards Israel which led to war in July 2006. Siniora also reminded us that Mohamed Khatami once said "Hizbullah is 100% an Iranian Party." The message was clear, there is no equivocation on the part of Siniora as to his view of Hizbullah and Iranian collusion inside Lebanon.

THE SYRIAN REGIME
IT'S ALL ABOUT THEM

¶12. (S) Siniora explained his vision of Syria's strategic priorities. First and foremost, the Syrian regime is worried about its own survival. Second, it wants to maintain its influence in Lebanon. Third, it wants to try to regain the Golan Heights.

¶13. (S) Lebanon continues to be a captive of foreign regimes. Iran and Syria continue to use Lebanon as a battleground. Stressing the need for firmness with Syria, Siniora also expressed a desire to see concrete results and solutions with the Syrians. Noting that Syria cannot be "wiped off the map," Siniora told us that ignoring and isolating Syria is not the solution either. In fact, it is as if we have placed a "cat in the corner." Eventually that cat is going to become a nuisance to us. Lebanon is forced by its geography to have good relations with Syria,

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but these relations should be based on mutual respect. "We should not be a headache for them, nor them for us."

THE WAY FORWARD WITH SYRIA
NO SACRIFICE OF LEBANON

¶14. (S) Even though Syria is a dishonest regime, Siniora told ADM Fallon that the US and Europe must show Syria that they are ready to engage with the regime if Syria is willing to help. In Siniora's mind, the only way this can happen is if the Syrians make an "advanced payment" before any dialogue begins. He hears them say many things, but he does not see much action on their part.

¶15. (S) ADM Fallon told PM Siniora that he holds no illusions about Syria and that they will be a player in the process. He emphasized that he thinks Syria's influence in Lebanon and elsewhere goes beyond what is appropriate. Leaning forward and drawing attention to the importance of his next statement, ADM Fallon told PM Siniora, "We will not make a deal with Syria at the expense of Lebanon. Your country is light years ahead of how we see Syria." Expressing appreciation, the Prime Minister responded to this point saying, "we don't want Lebanon on the table for trading."

NUMBER ONE PRIORITY FOR LEBANON
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

¶16. (S) The Prime Minister stressed that the election of a Lebanese President is central to the continuation of a

democratic system and the acceptance of moderate and democratic principles. "Lebanon as a model of co-existence is no longer only important for Lebanon, it is also important for the region, the Arab world, the Islamic world."

¶17. (S) Adamantly, Siniora told ADM Fallon that there absolutely should be no change to the Lebanese constitution before the elections. He said that Syria used to do this all the time. Rejecting this idea, the Prime Minister said that Lebanon would become just like other Arab regimes if it accepted Syria's attempts to "clone Lebanon using the Syrian model." Indeed, Siniora feels that his government must safeguard the sovereignty of Lebanon and not allow it to become a battleground in the region. The consequences of losing Lebanon will be to enflame other countries in the region. "We need to put out fires here, not add to them."

WE WANT A UNIFYING PRESIDENT
BUT NOT A MILITARY PRESIDENT

¶18. (S) Siniora also sees the elections as a catalyst for change in other parts of the country as well. The Prime Minister sees these elections as a way for the state to further extend the State's control over its people and lands; however, this must be done with a President that is committed to all of Lebanon who is not a threat to Syria. After exclamations from his advisor Mohammed Chattah about the Prime Minister being a threat to Syria, the Prime Minister simply reiterated his previous assessment of Syria saying, "Yes, yes. The Syrians want everything." Siniora continued to outline his strategic vision for the Presidency saying that he wants to see the State take full control of Lebanon. "I'm not talking about a Middle Eastern democracy; I want to fulfill the Western idea of democracy."

¶19. (S) After Nahr Al Bared, there is nothing that can guarantee the Lebanese people other than a proper state with an Army that is not politicized. In an obvious reference to Gen Michel Sleiman, the LAF Commander, the Prime Minister said that the State should not attract Army officers to become political.

CONTROL OF BORDERS, UNIFIL, AND
CLOSING COMMENTS ON COOPERATION

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¶20. (S) ADM Fallon asked the PM about his view of border control, especially with regards to the re-supply of Hizbullah. The Prime Minister flatly responded that border control will not be possible without the support and cooperation of Syria. At this time, the PM assesses that the Syrians are not cooperating, nor are they in the mood to cooperate. Instead, the best alternative is the current Arab-Islamic force that is being proposed for the border. This is not to diminish the importance of the German Northern Border Pilot Project, but that project is a different matter that is an example inside of Lebanon for the degree of cooperation it promotes among the security agencies.

¶20. (S) Expressing satisfaction with UNIFIL, Siniora does not think that the UNIFIL mandate will expand. In fact, the Syrians rejected a call for UNIFIL to extend its operation out to the eastern Lebanese border with Syria.

¶21. (S) The meeting closed with a warm atmosphere and good rapport. The PM related personal stories of his time with the late Rafiq Hariri when they were childhood friends. It is evident that Siniora hopes to live up to the goals and aspirations of the former Prime Minister. After a brief gift exchange, Siniora reminded ADM Fallon that "nothing

succeeds like success. We are making progress; we have made progress; we are succeeding."

¶22. Admiral Fallon has reviewed this cable.
FELTMAN